

SENATE DEMOCRATS PRIORITIES 2007

Increasing Access to Affordable, Quality Health Care

The Senate Democrats are committed to ensuring that all of Connecticut's residents have access to affordable, quality health care. This goal, however, cannot be achieved in just one legislative session. The following are our health care priorities for this legislative session. These are the first of many steps that must be taken in order to fix a system in desperate need of repair.

Promote Early Prevention

Expand the availability of services through school-based health centers (SBHCs) including:

- Preventive care as well as diagnosis and treatment of certain acute and chronic illnesses
- Behavioral health care
- Oral health care
- Links to other services in the community such as local health departments, community health centers, hospitals, social service providers, mental health and family service agencies, and youth service bureaus

Increase the State's Commitment to Quality Health Care and Wellness

- Collect and analyze data on health care utilization for children and adults, including screenings and immunizations appropriate to age, gender, culture and race
- Medicaid coverage for smoking cessation—quitting is one of the most effective ways of improving the long-term health of individuals and their families
- Explore methods to computerize individual medical records, keeping them confidential and making them portable to improve treatment and prescription drug accuracy
- Ensure access to the new HPV vaccine which can prevent cervical cancer
- Provide grants for pilot programs to offer before and/or after school physical activity programs (pilot with 4 school districts)
- Establish uniform quality rating systems for hospitals and providers
- Establish incentives that promote healthy behavior

Expand Access to Care

- Increase Medicaid provider rates over a 2-3 year period, with particular attention to primary care, oral health and behavioral health
- Establish regional transportation in rural areas for medical appointments
- Expand HUSKY coverage for children and adults

Provide Relief for Business and Employers

- Review current CT reinsurance program and explore expansion
- “Carve out” of a prescription drug benefit for all new enrollees in the Municipal Employee Health Insurance Program. *Streamlining prescription drug benefits under one Pharmacy Benefit Manager would allow for major savings in the prescription drug area*
- Tax incentives and support for businesses that continue comprehensive coverage for their employees and employees’ dependents

Smart, Affordable Energy for Today and Tomorrow

The recent increase in electricity rates has reinforced the urgent need for the state to examine both short-term remedies and long-term solutions to help stabilize energy costs for businesses and residents. The state must encourage energy efficiency and conservation through greater investment and incentives. In addition, the state ought to work with our Congressional delegation on a federal energy policy that emphasizes conservation, investment in renewables and energy independence.

Short-term Remedies

- Freeze the Sales Tax on electric bills for businesses
 - Currently, certain businesses that pay over \$150 in electricity costs per month also pay sales tax
- Freeze (recalibrate) Public Service Utility Tax on gas and electric bills for residents and businesses
- **Increase by 50% the CT Energy Efficiency Fund. Cost: \$32.5 million; savings: \$130 million**
In 2005, customers of CL&P and UI contributed \$65 million through a conservation charge on their electric bills; every \$1 invested in conservation yields a \$4 return in future lifetime savings
 - Incentives will also be offered to increase efficiency of oil and gas heating systems for residential and business use
- Implement an ENERGY STAR Sales Tax Exemption for certain appliances
 - Applicable to refrigerators, dishwashers, clothes washers, air conditioners, furnaces, heat pumps, and central air conditioners. Cost: \$20 million; savings: \$91 million
- Provide incentives for homeowners to upgrade boilers and gas furnaces to increase efficiency and save energy
- **Allocate \$5 million to Operation Fuel**
Operation Fuel is a private, non-profit statewide program that provides emergency fuel assistance to low income, elderly, and disabled households that are not eligible for energy assistance from state-funded programs

- Reduce lighting costs for low-income residents
 - Provide efficient lighting for low-income residents who currently receive assistance through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Cost: \$1.5 million; savings \$24 *million* in the first year
- Promote on-site generation of electricity for major commercial and industrial users

Long-term Solutions

- Establish an Office of Strategic Power Procurement with the mission of providing greater price predictability and stability to consumers
- Increase efficiency of existing facilities by 15%, utilizing waste heat
- Offer long-term contracts to generating facilities
- Implement aggressive “time of use” rates to encourage peak time savings
- Support implementation of smart technologies, such as metering and thermostats
- Establish incentives (tax credit, direct subsidies) to develop alternative fuels including biodiesel, ethanol and other fuels with a goal of reducing dependence on imported oil by 10% by 2012

Education for Our Future

Ensure the Fairness and Equity of the Education Cost Sharing Formula

- **Improve the state’s share of local education expenses:** Increase the per-pupil portion of the state’s education cost sharing (ECS) grant to districts and provide more special education funds to towns in need
- **Lessen the property tax burden on municipalities:** Education costs comprise 50% to 80% of municipal budgets. Increasing the state’s share of local education expenses alleviates the burden of local property taxes

Safe Schools Initiative

- **School Security Assessments:** \$1 million from the Fiscal Year 2007 surplus to help districts pay for the costs of conducting a thorough assessment of the security at their schools (Cost: approximately \$7,000 - \$10,000 per school)
- **Security Infrastructure Grant:** \$10 million in bonding to help schools purchase and install security infrastructure, such as surveillance cameras, entry door buzzer systems, scan cards, panic alarms, or other systems to improve security. These funds should also be permitted to pay for necessary planning and design. The cost to provide such systems range from \$10,000 - \$200,000 per school, and a state grant will be designed to reimburse most, if not all, of each school’s costs on a sliding scale.

- **Security Training and Equipment:** \$4 million from the Fiscal Year 2007 surplus to provide training to school personnel on: how to use new security systems; procedures to improve school security; and improved coordination with local first-responders. Surplus funds should also be made available to help schools purchase portable security devices like metal detector wands and screening machines, if local school leaders determine such options are the most appropriate for their needs.
- **School Construction Grants:** Additionally, as a condition of receiving a state reimbursement for a new facility, any new school construction application will be required to include plans for security infrastructure. This requirement will also be extended to applications for renovations of school entryways.

Transportation

The state must continue to build upon the landmark \$1.4 billion transportation legislation enacted last session. Senate Democrats will continue to focus on mass transit, increasing rail freight and developing and utilizing the state's deep water ports.